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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 YEREVAN 000422

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KJUS](#) [KDEM](#) [AJ](#) [AM](#)  
SUBJECT: EUR A/S GORDON'S MEETING WITH OPPOSITION LEADER  
RAFFI HOVANNISSIAN

Classified By: Marie L. Yovanovitch. Reason 1.4 (b,d)

#### SUMMARY

1. (C) Meeting with EUR A/S Philip Gordon on June 9, former Armenian Foreign Minister and current leader of the opposition Raffi Hovannissian characterized the results of the recent elections for Yerevan Mayor and City Council as a "failed post-Soviet" election that shows the challenge Armenia faces in the development of rule of law and mature electoral systems. He described television and radio as under control of the President, with the opposition having difficulty getting widespread dissemination of its message. He criticized the performance of the opposition in the Yerevan elections and said he hopes that the recent defection of the ARF-Dashnaktsutian Party will result in its becoming a true opposition party, not focused on the single issue of genocide recognition. While he favors reconciliation with Turkey, Hovannissian insisted that Turkey needs to come to terms with its Ottoman past. Ultimately, however, neither reconciliation with Turkey nor a solution to the Nagorno Karabakh dispute is likely without democratic reforms in Armenia, including the release of political prisoners. End Summary.

#### A FAILED POST-SOVIET ELECTION

2. (C) Heritage party leader and former Foreign Minister Raffi Hovannissian told EUR A/S Philip Gordon on June 9 that the May 31 elections for Yerevan Mayor and City Council were a "failed post-Soviet election." Won by the ruling Republican party with its coalition partner Prosperous Armenia a respectable second, there were widespread voting irregularities (many witnessed by Embassy observers, reported septel). The conduct of the election showed what Armenia is up against with respect to establishing rule of law and transparent electoral systems, Hovannissian said. Other than the first post-independence referendum and first Presidential election in 1991, he claimed all elections in Armenia -- including the 1996 re-election of Levon Ter-Petrossian -- have been flawed. This most recent election only showed that the cheating had become more polished; while one candidate may not be receiving 99 percent of the vote, it is still one-party rule where the ruling party electoral machine ensures it has sufficient votes to win, and enlists public monies and public institutions in support of its election efforts.

#### STATE OF THE OPPOSITION

3. (C) Asked whether he could make such comments about the state of Armenia's democracy on television, Hovannissian said he is able to appear on television occasionally, but rarely on live programs. While he can write what he wants in newspapers, television and radio are by far the dominant

information sources for most Armenians, and those are controlled by the state, and in particular by the President. Even the most popular newspapers are read by no more than 10,000 people, so have limited influence. Hovannissian stressed the importance of reopening the independent television station Al-Plus as well as the need for another independent television network. Before winning a place in the National Assembly two years ago, Hovannissian's Heritage Party was generally barred from Armenian television; the situation changed somewhat during the election campaign when the GOAM was under pressure to provide access to all parties.

14. (C) Hovannissian claimed that the opposition -- in particular the Armenian National Congress (ANC) coalition led by former President Levon Ter-Petrossian -- made errors during the mayoral campaign that hurt its cause. Everyone is now blaming each other, while LTP calls once again for demonstrations and the ANC refuses to accept the 13 seats that it won in the election. He asserted that Armenia suffered a great tragedy in 1915, and this has been compounded by the democratic challenges the country has faced in recent years. He expressed hope that the ARF-Dashnaksutiun Party, which recently broke with the governing coalition over its reconciliation efforts with Turkey, will become a genuine opposition party and will not focus just on the single issue of genocide recognition. He hopes it will support rule of law and democratic reform, which he claims to be at the heart of Heritage's agenda.

ARMENIA-TURKEY RECONCILIATION REQUIRES DEMOCRATIC REFORM...

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YEREVAN 00000422 002 OF 003

15. (C) Hovannissian said that while he supports the GOAM's efforts on reconciliation with Turkey, neither this effort not a settlement of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict can be truly successful without legitimate democratic reform in Armenia. He wishes to see more emphasis placed on this by the international community, expressing concern that the presumption of preference is often given to conflict resolution and geopolitical preferences over democratic reform. This breeds a deepening sense of cynicism and a concern among the Armenian population regarding the role of outside players, including the USG. While Hovannissian said he wants the GOAM to succeed in restoring relations with Turkey, Armenia still needs democratic reform. The GOAM's current policies regarding prisoners and human rights abuses do not inspire confidence. The quality of internal democracy correlates to the ability to make good foreign policy. Hovannissian insisted that there is no reason a self-confident administration shouldn't have released political prisoners a long time ago.

16. (C) Hovannissian suggested that the GOAM has "played Europe well," showing hints of possible reform shortly before the quarterly meetings of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), but rarely comes through. The next meeting will occur on June 22, which may explain why it is now raising the prospect of an "amnesty" for political detainees. Yet at the same time we see a reversion to old ways, the most recent example being the termination of the fact-finding commission on the March 1 events. Recent developments have been a blow to transparency and represent a lack of willingness to pursue the truth. There has still not been one person charged for any of the ten persons killed on March 1.

...AND HISTORICAL ACCEPTANCE  
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17. (C) Hovannissian supports restoration of relations with Turkey without preconditions. As much as he is opposed to many policies of the current administration, he asserted the GOAM has been very good in reaching out to Turkey under these

terms. While he applauded Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan's efforts in the reconciliation process, he said that some of his recent statements and those of Foreign Minister Davutoglu, mostly with respect to linking this agreement to a settlement of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, are not helpful.

¶18. (C) Asked if he would accept the GOAM not questioning the legitimacy of the existing border between Turkey and Armenia if Turkey similarly agrees, Hovannissian said he is willing to accept an adjudication process. His larger concern is that Turkey as an independent nation must come to terms with Ottoman policies of 1915, whether it is recognizing "genocide" or agreeing to restoration of the cultural heritage that those events wiped out. With respect to accepting an historical commission, he suggested that upon re-establishment of diplomatic relations, there should be a range of commissions established and studies undertaken, but not one that puts "genocide" at the center; such recognition should be a starting point. Turkish civil society and the younger generation must come to terms with the past, not in order to foster a sense of collective guilt but to help Turkish citizens better understand their history. Currently much of Turkish history is not even taught because of a policy of denial, and in the process it is not only the suffering of Armenians that is overlooked, but the heroism of thousands of Turkish families who saved Armenians.

¶19. (C) Turkey may be driven by its interests in European integration and its relations with the U.S. to acknowledge its Ottoman past, and as a simple matter of reality he believes that real normalization of relations with Armenia is not possible without doing so. While relations can be restored without such recognition, over time there will need to be movement on these issues.

IF KOSOVO, WHY NOT NK?  
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¶10. (C) On Nagorno Karabakh, Hovannissian suggested that if scores of nations can recognize an independent Kosovo and Russia recognizes South Ossetia (which he claimed could never be a viable independent state), it shows that recognition is an inherently political act. Therefore, he wonders why Nagorno Karabakh could not be accorded similar recognition.

YEREVAN 00000422 003 OF 003

OLIGARCH ECONOMY, PRESIDENT ASSERTING CONTROL  
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¶11. (C) While Armenia recently had many years of strong macroeconomic growth, it was rather narrow and of little benefit to the general population. The economy continues to be controlled by a small group of well-connected businessmen and politicians engaged in bribery and unjust enrichment, and replete with conflicts of interest. Hovannissian decried a current proposal (now delayed until the end of June) in the National Assembly to allow agents from the State Revenue Committee to be located within large businesses as an invitation to corruption and an attempt by the President to centralize power.

COMMENT  
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¶12. (C) Hovannissian's positions are generally well-crafted and based on sound legal argument, even in cases where they may not be politically viable. His emphasis on improving the quality of Armenia's government for both domestic considerations and foreign policy legitimacy is widely held among opposition groups, many of which share the GOAM's foreign policy goals but are reluctant to support them publicly. Hovannissian, though a popular national figure and the leader of what was until recently the only opposition

faction in the National Assembly, is often unwilling to invest himself fully in the political process at home at the risk of a major failure. The decision by Heritage not to participate in the opposition coalition in the recent Yerevan Mayor elections -- which the party made and Hovannisian opposed -- did not help the opposition cause.

¶13. (U) EUR A/S Gordon has approved this cable  
YOVANOVITCH